

Performance disasters in the Athenian theatre

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It'll be alright on the night

Anyone with any experience of the theatre at all knows perfectly well that things can go badly wrong when plays are performed. Actors forget their lines, miss their cues, trip over rogue objects, become ill or lose their voices, stage hands go on strike, the curtain gets stuck, a fire alarm goes off, the set partially or wholly collapses, that crucial door backstage gets jammed, there's a sudden power failure or an exploding light bulb, individual actors or the whole cast rub the audience up the wrong way and get booed, and so on and so on.

We may accept all that and worse as a scenario for the present day, but there is sometimes a tendency for us to put a protective cover around ancient Greek drama, to cocoon it, as it were, from the mundane realities of other manifestations of drama. The reverential treatment these plays have received in Western academic and cultural traditions has discouraged any interest of what happened when they went wrong in performance.

But the plays first performed on the Athenian stage in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. were just as susceptible to accident and human error or sabotage. My motive for airing some examples here is not any desire to diminish the status or value of Athenian drama, but to demonstrate its status as a living performance phenomenon. Of course, the 'disasters' that actually occurred must surely have been the exceptions, remembered and recorded for the very reason that they were events out of the ordinary. And if some of the stories in our ancient sources are simply invented, as they quite possibly are, or at least distorted and exaggerated, that simply proves my point: it was not only the text of Athenian drama that was regarded as culturally important, but also the *performance*.

Commercial breakdown

Every year, in the dramatic competition at the main festivals in Athens, the City Dionysia and the Lenaea, there were inevitable 'failures' in the limited sense that only one poet could win the prize for tragedy, and one for comedy. To end up second or, worse, third for tragedy, or in some contexts up to fifth for comedy, may have felt like a disaster in itself. In the case of Euripides, given that he won the first prize so rarely, his whole career could be seen as something of a disaster. On one famous occasion, however, according to our ancient source, Euripides rewrote his treatment of the Hippolytus story, which had flopped first time round: he won one of his few victories. Similarly, Aristophanes appears to have revised his play *Clouds* partially after the original version bombed in the competition, and it is this partially revised version which we possess today. At one point in the play (the so-called *parabasis*, where the chorus addresses the spectators on behalf of the poet), Aristophanes playfully takes the audience of the earlier play to task for not appreciating the sophistication of his work and preferring other poets' slapstick instead.

The audiences of Athens could take against poets for a number of reasons. In Aristophanes' *Knights* (and again in the *parabasis*), the chorus explains why the poet had not previously put on plays under his own name: because, they say, audiences are

cruel, their tastes change, and they give the cold shoulder to poets as they grow older. The chorus refer first to Magnes, a comic poet of a previous generation who had actually won a record eleven victories (the only dateable one being in 472 B.C.), describing his futile attempts at sensationalism to cover up his loss of comic acuity. They then go on to paint a most unflattering picture of another comic poet, Cratinus, as an old man, fallen from popularity, shambling about in a state of constant thirst. It is worth pointing out, though, that Aristophanes has a motive for presenting Cratinus in this light: he was actually one of his current competitors!

Bloomers

One of the most intriguing references to a poet's failure in the dramatic competition can be found in Chapter 17 of Aristotle's *Poetics*. A certain Carcinus apparently made some blunder associated with the character Amphiarus (a seer compelled to go against his will to certain death with expedition of the Seven against Thebes). It is impossible to be sure, from Aristotle's brief and cryptic reference ('Amphiarus came back from the temple'), exactly what the blunder was. Most probably, however, it concerned mismanaged movement of the character in the acting space. In any case, according to Aristotle, it aroused the audience's extreme displeasure.

You've been framed

We do not find much in the ancient sources about what may be called technological misadventure, apart from the story (variously associated with two different poets, Pratinas and Aeschylus) about the collapse of theatre seating. It is possible that dramatic performances were originally held in a different setting (perhaps the Agora), in which case this seating collapse story – if it holds any truth – may refer to seating there. Some scholars, however, think in terms rather of temporary seating already in the established theatre of Dionysus on the southern slopes of the Acropolis, replaced after the disaster with permanent seating cut into the hillside.

It would be exciting if some story about malfunction or accident associated with theatre machinery had been preserved. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The nearest we get is the *potential* for this, as seen in Aristophanes' *Peace*. In this play, the hero Trygaeus flies up to heaven to visit Zeus on a dung beetle, which was apparently hoisted up by the stage crane (or *mechane*). Once he gets going, he becomes scared; stepping outside of the fiction, he tells the crane operator to watch out because he is about to soil himself!

Celebrity howlers

There is more scope when we come to consider disasters concerned with individual performers. One especially amusing incident, which is perhaps to be seen as a 'hiccup' rather than a 'disaster,' is reported by Plutarch in his *Life of Phocion*.

According to this, a certain actor was not given by the producer the kind of entourage he thought he deserved for his royal part. So he refused to go out on stage, and kept the audience waiting. The producer responded by pushing him out, crying 'Don't you see that Phocion's wife always goes out with one maidservant? Your vanity will corrupt our womenfolk'. The audience is said to have given this a standing ovation.

Rather more serious are the stories told about the politician Aeschines, the rival of the great Athenian orator Demosthenes. This man had been an actor earlier in his career, and Demosthenes, in trying to discredit him, goes out of his way to show that he had been an unmitigated disaster. Naturally, we have to take account of rhetorical distortion, but for my purposes this is evidence not for the real Aeschines but for the expected consequences of bad acting. Demosthenes paints a graphic picture of a failed bit-part performer, driven from the stage by a hostile audience, getting his very food from the missiles of fruit they hurl at him. Later sources, perhaps elaborating on Demosthenes' smear campaign, go so far as to record that Aeschines once fell out of a chariot in front of a theatre audience and had to be picked up by the Chorus trainer.

Perhaps the most famous actor's blunder, though, is that committed by the actor Hegelochus. In the role of Orestes struggling with manic visions, he mispronounced a crucial word so that instead of saying, 'out of the surging waves [i.e. of madness] once more I see calm water', he in fact said the equivalent of, 'out of surging waves once more I see a weasel'. The ancient commentator on the passage adds that many comic poets mocked him for this (there is an instance of this in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where the slave Xanthias refers to precisely this incident).

You the jury

We turn finally to the audience. We've already noted disaster caused by the audience when they hissed plays or performers off the stage. Plato, indeed, sniffs in the *Republic* at the power that Athenian drama gave to the audience. There is also some evidence of audience factionalism. In Plutarch's *Life of Cimon*, we read how the audience on one occasion were so divided in support of the young Sophocles on the one hand, and the elderly Aeschylus on the other, that the presiding magistrate (or 'archon') did not appoint the judges at random as usual but prevailed on the prestigious ten generals (Cimon included) to do the job instead.

There are also, however, stories of disasters afflicting the audience, most famously that reported by Herodotus involving the overwhelming emotional effect of Phrynichus' play *Capture of Miletus*, which dramatised the recent sack of that Ionian city by the Persians. The whole theatre (we are told) broke into weeping. Phrynichus was fined 1000 drachmas for reminding them of their own sorrows, and any reperformance of the play was banned. Almost as sensational, though with only a slim connection with historical reality, is the report in the anonymous *Life of Aeschylus* (written, it must be said, much later in antiquity), which describes children fainting and women having miscarriages as a result of the horrifying effect of the entry of the chorus of Furies in the *Eumenides*.

The Athenian stage, then, was not without its 'disasters', real or invented, and it comes across as all the more alive, for this very reason. It would not, in fact, be an exaggeration to say that a highly dramatic subtext is possibly lurking invisibly behind every word in the texts of the surviving corpus of classical Athenian drama. Considering the problems and tensions of this performance culture will make us more sensitive to the thrills and excitement that ancient audiences must have experienced as they watched the plays before their eyes.

For more on the Greek theatre, see the articles by James Morwood and Judith Mossman in this issue.

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<http://didaskalia.ber>